On Humor and Incongruity

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John Allen Paulos's book *Mathematics and Humor* represents a major advance in our understanding of the logical structure of humor.[1] In this paper, I shall, however, concentrate not on Paulos's many remarkable insights, but rather on what I take to be his major error. His major error, I think, lies in his espousal of a general incongruity theory of humor. It is an error into which many theorists of humor fall.

Having made a brief review of the history of theories of humor, Paulos states the incongruity theory in the following rather rough way:

> Most of the theorists I have cited (as well as those not quoted here) agree, once allowance is made for different ways of putting things and different emphases, that a necessary ingredient of humor is that two (or more) incongruous ways of viewing something (a person, a sentence, a situation) be juxtaposed. In other words, for something to be funny, some unusual, inappropriate, or odd aspects of it must be perceived together and compared. We have seen that different writers have emphasized different oppositions: expectation versus surprise, the mechanical versus the spiritual, superiority versus incompetence, balance versus exaggeration, and propriety versus vulgarity. I will henceforth use the word "incongruity" in an extended sense comprising all the above oppositions.[2]

He proceeds to suggest a "loose definition of humor," which runs as follows: "Together . . ., two ingredients—a perceived incongruity with a point and an appropriate emotional climate—seem to be both necessary and sufficient for humor."[3] This entails that incongruity (or, if you wish,

what might be called incongruity in the eye of the beholder) is a necessary condition of humor. For the purposes of this paper, the general incongruity theory of humor is to be understood to be simply this: In some cases, the contemplation of an incongruity yields a humorous effect, and in the final analysis, this is the only way at all in which humorous effects arise. One might, of course, try to specify in what cases the contemplation of an incongruity yields a humorous effect. Paulos, for example, in the passage quoted just above, claims that the incongruity must "have a point" and that the emotional climate must be right.

The question to be attacked here is simply this. Is the general incongruity theory of humor sound? By way of casting doubt on it, I shall now present what would appear to be two counterexamples to the claim that incongruity is a necessary condition of humor. First, then, Groucho Marx quipped, referring to a safari in Africa: "We shot two bucks, but that was all the money we had."[4] Here, the listener makes a transition from one interpretation of "we shot two bucks" to another, entirely different interpretation. But these two interpretations are not incongruous: they are simply very different. They are as different as, but no more incongruous than, the following pair of statements: (1) "We shot two male antelopes"; (2) "On an impulse, we spent all our money on beer." Nor is it incongruous to spend or to speak of spending money impulsively while on safari. It is by no means clear that incongruity plays any role at all in this case. There is, moreover, reason to suspect that in many cases in which incongruity does figure, it figures incidentally, not essentially. To take an amusing example from Woody Allen: "Not only is there no God, but try getting a plumber on weekends."[5] There is incongruity here, in that one expects to encounter a statement parallel to "there is no God," i.e., a statement of a fundamental ground of human helplessness and suffering, and instead, surprisingly, encounters a flip statement of a

real but minor frustration: what one encounters does not fit in with what one expects to encounter. It would appear, however, that Allen's remark is funny not because it involves this incongruity but rather because, to put the point in the most general terms, the first half, up to the comma, establishes a mood or emotional set that is, so to speak, undermined by the second half. In the right circumstances, any statement or act which in this way undermines a mood or emotional state or an effort will be funny, whether or not an incongruity is involved. To claim that the reader or listener responds to the incongruity in this case is to claim that he considers his now extinguished state of expectation, considers that which he has in fact encountered—for these are the two incongruous factors—and compares or combines them. This, however, is a most doubtful proposition. There is strong reason to suspect, then, that in this particular case the incongruity involved is incidental to the humorous effect, i.e., that it is not what creates that effect.

Two aspects of the present approach that have already figured in the discussion ought to be stated explicitly at this point. First, in the course of criticizing the incongruity theory of humor, I shall assume the truth of a certain account of the psychodynamics of humor. This account was advocated by Arthur Koestler; it might be called the arousal-reduction account, although this is not Koestler's term. The arousal-reduction account states that the humor-response—laughing, smiling, or a purely mental counterpart of these if there is such a thing—occurs when the cognitive processes that support a state of arousal are interrupted, and functions as a means of reducing that arousal.

Secondly, it's important to bear in mind that not every difference constitutes an incongruity. The question is not whether contrasts or transitions are essential to humor, but whether incongruity, i.e., inconsistency, inharmony, or disagreement is essential. Here a problem arises in

that the meaning of the word "incongruity" is remarkably vague. It might be helpful to quote Webster's Third at this point. It defines "incongruous"—the definition is far more informative than that of "incongruity"—as follows:

> . . . lacking congruity: as (a) characterized by lack of harmony, consistency, or compatibility with one another (— colors) (— desires) (b) characterized by disagreement or lack of conformity with something (conduct — with avowed principles) (c) characterized by inconsistency or inharmony of its own parts or qualities (an — story) (d) characterized by lack of propriety or suitableness (— manners)[6]

Before moving to general theoretical considerations, it would perhaps be well to examine specific cases and types of cases of incongruity and humor. First, let us consider, one by one, the various "oppositions" that Paulos lists in the quotation above: "expectation versus surprise, the mechanical versus the spiritual, superiority versus incompetence, balance versus exaggeration, and propriety versus vulgarity."

One forms the expectation of encountering X, but to his surprise encounters Y instead (where X and Y can be particular things, things of certain types, etc.). Clearly, this sequence of events often figures in the experience of humor, and it has been admitted that it involves incongruity of a sort, in that what one encounters does not fit in with one's expectations. But does this incongruity figure in the psychodynamic workings of the cases in question, i.e., those jokes or humorous occurrences in which the jester or circumstances lead one to expect X but present one instead with Y? The case of the Woody Allen quip, discussed above, leads one strongly to suspect that in many cases of the type in question, the answer is no. That is to say, in many cases, humor arises out of unfulfilled expectations but does not stem from the incongruity between what was expected and what is encountered. Indeed, it might be very difficult

to hit upon an example of humor classifiable as an instance of "expectation versus surprise" in which the humor flows from the incongruity between expectation and actual encounter. As suggested above with reference to the Woody Allen quip, such an example would constitute a case in which one considers one's now extinguished state of expecting X, considers one's encounter with Y, compares or combines the two, and in so doing notices the incongruity between them. But ordinarily, of course, when one's expectations surprisingly go unfulfilled, one does no such thing: one simply expects, perceives or realizes, and is surprised.

As for "the mechanical versus the spiritual," it's important to make clear just what is meant by "the mechanical" and "the spiritual." Perhaps the point Paulos wishes to make by means of this distinction is simply that it is incongruous for a human being to behave as if he were an automaton, and that when a human being does behave in this way—when, for example, a man goosesteps swinging stiff arms for the amusement of his children—the humorous effect, if any, arises from this incongruity. There may be some truth in this. On the other hand, there is room for doubt, even in cases of this sort, as to whether the humorous effect really stems from the incongruity. Perhaps, in some cases, the psychodynamics show the pattern described in the following example. The presence of the father gives rise to a series of feelings and to a certain emotional set and activates attitudes of respect, fear, or whatever in his children; but the automaton-like behavior renders these feelings and attitudes momentarily inappropriate and unsustainable, and thus they are spilled in laughter. In this case, what is essential to the humorous effect is this undermining of prevailing feeling: this, and not any incongruity, is what causes laughter. Again, perhaps in some cases the psychodynamics show the following pattern. For the children, to see the father behaving like an automaton is to see something that does not fit in with previous ex-

perience, something that cannot immediately be "mentally processed," as it were; because this phenomenon cannot immediately be processed, it brings about a temporary breakdown of ongoing mental effort, and the arousal entailed by this effort is thus released in laughter. But in this case, fundamentally, it is not the incongruous character, not the clash of two aspects that don't go together, but the "unprocessable" character of the stimulus that brings on the humor response. The incongruity amounts to a novelty, the novelty is unprocessable, and the humor response occurs because it is unprocessable.

On the other hand, the expressions "the mechanical" and "the spiritual" might be given a somewhat different interpretation. To borrow a distinction from P. F. Strawson, they might be taken to refer respectively to what might be called the purely physical aspect and the spiritual aspect of a human being.[7] A person does have both these aspects: a man might weigh 160 lbs. and have thick fingers (facts which pertain to his purely physical aspect), and walk with a dignified stride and enjoy jazz music (facts which pertain to his spiritual aspect). But it is important to note that the circumstance of having both a purely physical aspect and a spiritual aspect does not represent an incongruity. These two aspects are not incongruous in Webster's sense (a), nor, perhaps even more clearly, are they incongruous in sense (b), (c), or (d). Indeed, there is congruity as between having a beautiful body and being proud of one's appearance. In a given person, it is likely that many purely physical and spiritual elements go together very well, are the opposite of incongruous. Perhaps it should be added that the purely physical side of a person is not to be despised. It cannot be said without qualification that this side is the "lower" and the spiritual side the "higher," for it is easy to imagine cases in which, at least from certain points of view, a person is physically magnificent but spiritually trite or repulsive. In many cases, humor arises

because a "low" aspect of a person (or an event that makes a person look "low") contrasts with a "high" aspect. But the "low" aspect may be purely physical and the "high" aspect spiritual, or the "low" aspect spiritual and the "high" aspect purely physical, or they may both be purely physical or both spiritual.

The case of the dignified official who slips on a banana peel and falls also involves mechanical and "spiritual" aspects. But this is quite unlike the case in which a man goosesteps and swings his arms for a laugh. In this latter case, the man behaves like an automaton, while in the former, in this sense of "behave," the man does not behave at all, i.e., does not choose, does not act deliberately in falling. There is an incongruity in the case of the official in that falling is undignified—perhaps in that it represents a loss of control—and thus is incongruous with respect to the official's established dignity. But why is his fall funny? When one sees the official walking along in his dignified way on his dignified business, one feels a mixture of respect, envy, fear, hostility, or whatever. But when one sees him fall, one cannot sustain these feelings, because he has ceased momentarily to be an object capable of sustaining them, and thus, as it were, they are spilled in a smile or in laughter. What is essential here is that feelings are aroused and then the support for them removed. Any way of removing the support for these feelings will create the humorous effect—i.e., any way that does not simultaneously stifle the laughter response. If someone pulls out a pistol and shoots the official dead, this might well change our feelings towards him without bringing on laughter. In the humorous case, it is the undermining of feeling, and not the incongruity involved, that is essential. It would appear that the incongruity here is merely incidental.

To move on to the next opposition, "superiority versus incompetence," in those cases in which a person laughs upon suddenly perceiving himself

as superior, just why does he laugh? What are the psychodynamics of his laughter? Precisely what sort of state of arousal is it that his laughter serves to deflate? There is perhaps some truth to the following conjecture. Most people, perhaps all normal people, are frequently attacked by doubts about themselves and often labor under feelings of inadequacy, and these negative feelings are undermined when one suddenly and unexpectedly comes to perceive himself as superior. Now my sudden perception that I am superior may well be unexpected, but there does not appear to be anything incongruous in the case. Consider the following case. I see a toy dog in a shop window, then suddenly realize that it's not a toy dog but a live dog. Here, my mind makes a sudden, unexpected transition from seeing things in one way to seeing them in another, but this transition entails no incongruity. In the case of superiority humor, I make a sudden transition from seeing myself as inadequate to seeing myself as superior, but there is no more incongruity here than in the case of the dog. Now perhaps, if we stretch the meaning of the term "incongruity" far enough, we can say that whenever there is a mental transition of this sort, there is an incongruity, in that the new perception does not match the old one. But even under this definition, if, in cases of superiority humor, one's laughter represents a laughing away of feelings of inadequacy, then one laughs not because one has perceived an incongruity, but rather because one's feelings of inadequacy have, as it were, been undermined. What is essential to the humor here is not the perception of an incongruity, but the transition from a way of thinking which, as it were, supports a certain state of feeling to a different way of thinking which does not support that state of feeling. Perhaps it is worth pointing out, too, that if I laugh because I perceive myself to be superior and another to be incompetent, then what I perceive to be superior is one thing and what I perceive to be incompetent another: they

are not two aspects of one thing.

Now for the opposition that Paulos calls "balance versus exaggeration." Caricature, satire, and parody fall under this heading. For the sake of brevity, I shall use the word "caricature" to cover all three of these forms. Now obviously, in order to appreciate a caricature as a caricature, it's necessary to be aware of the original and to see that original in the caricature. Moreover, any good caricature, that is, any that would appeal to an intellectually able and emotionally mature mind, is based on parts or aspects of the original that are genuinely, or are sincerely felt to be, ugly, weak, distasteful, unpleasant, morally repugnant, hateful, or, at least, odd or unusual. If a caricature does not play on real or perceived weaknesses of the original, but depicts bad points that the original isn't perceived to have at all, then, to the extent that the audience is able and mature, there will be no genuine humorous effect. On the other hand, to a mind that is both crude and hostile, any depiction of the original that is easily recognizable and includes ugly features might well be funny.

Let us ask how caricature works. I shall consider the cases of hostile satire and gentle parody. These two forms are not, perhaps, exhaustive of the genre in question, but I shall take them to be representative. Perhaps, then, the following simple account of the workings of successful hostile satire is near the mark. The audience feels hostile, or is newly made to feel hostile, towards the original, for otherwise the satire does not succeed. The audience, being hostile, feels an urge to make a telling attack on the object in question or at least participate vicariously in such an attack, but is more or less frustrated by an inability or lack of opportunity to do so. The satirist selects genuinely weak, ugly, or hateful parts or aspects of the object, or ones perceived as being so, and brings these into prominence in a clever and telling way. This, of course, constitutes

an attack, and the attack is perceived as damaging. The pent-up hostility and frustration or newly aroused hostility is thus rendered, to borrow a term from Koestler, redundant, at least for the moment, and so is released in laughter or a smile. In the case of the crude and hostile mind, even a random attribution of ugly or hateful attributes or actions may be perceived as a successful attack, and thus the same effect is produced. The case of gentle parody is not fundamentally different from this. Think of a parody of a social group written by a member of that group to bring amusement and to correct gently—e.g., a parody of Yuppies by a Yuppie for an audience of Yuppies that plays lightly on the self-centered striving and cool calculation that are characteristic of that group. If the parody is skillfully done, then, of course, it will bring laughter and smiles, perhaps more of the latter than the former, from members of the group and sympathetic nonmembers. Surely, at least for some people, the psychodynamics here work more or less in the following way. The parody brings about a sudden recognition or recall of minor faults, or faults perceived as minor. In a small way, within the context of general approval that prevails, and perhaps only momentarily, this recognition undermines confidence in the soundness of the group's values and way of life, and so a little of this feeling is released in smiling or laughter.

Now what does incongruity have to do with the humorous effect in cases of this sort? To begin with, the caricature itself need not contain any incongruity. Thus, for example, a visual caricature might feature a drawing of a man with a somewhat big nose and a very heavy beard, but there is no incongruity in having such a nose or beard. Moreover, it is stretching a point to say that a caricature must be incongruous with respect to its original. For in some cases the caricature is just a little different from the original, the nose just a little bigger or the beard just a little heavier or whatnot, but differences like these do not yield incongru-

ity according to the ordinary usage of the term. If a photograph of a person's face, for example, gives a slightly inaccurate impression, one doesn't on that account say that the photograph is incongruous, for that would be overstatement. It is necessary to bear in mind that not every difference represents or yields an incongruity. Moreover, even with respect to those cases of caricature that do involve true incongruity, it is questionable whether the incongruity often plays a fundamental role. Fundamentally, a caricature is funny because in one way or another it undermines feeling or aborts mental effort provoked or sustained by the original. It is the transition from a way of perceiving that sustains to one that undermines feeling or effort that is fundamental. Imagine, for example, a visual caricature in which the head of Ronald Reagan is attached to the body of an infant which is playing with toy missles. The point, of course, whether or not well taken, is that Reagan is ignorant and careless about nuclear arms. Clearly, this caricature is effective, for those for whom it is, not on account of the incongruity of attaching the head of an adult to the body of an infant, and not because Ronald Reagan doesn't really look like this and doesn't really play with toys, i.e., not because in certain respects the drawing doesn't match the original, but rather because with a little effort, one suddenly perceives that a telling attack has taken place, and this precipitates a release of feeling. It is in fact a sudden perception of *congruity* that leads to the humor response here. One who doesn't see the point of the caricature simply doesn't understand the caricature at all, however much incongruity he may see.

As for the opposition "propriety versus vulgarity," let us ask why it is that a vulgar act in a context of propriety sometimes elicits laughter. Typically, the maintenance of propriety requires a degree of self-control and self-denial, and successful self-control and self-denial in turn give rise to a certain level of frustration. Perhaps, then, in many cases, a vulgar act

committed in a context of propriety creates a humorous effect in that, by momentarily establishing a vulgar and hence more relaxed context, it permits the release of the frustration and tense feelings that attend the effort to act correctly. In other cases, perhaps, a vulgar act performed in response to a superficially proper one represents a successful act of defiance against a feared or hated figure. This might be funny to an audience involved to the right degree. There are, no doubt, other sorts of humor that come under the heading "propriety versus vulgarity." It appears reasonable to conjecture, however, that in most or all cases that come under this heading, that which is fundamental to the humorous effect is not the perception of incongruities, but rather, once again, the undermining of feeling and the aborting of effort. This includes those cases in which humor stems from the occurrence of nonfunctioning propriety in a context of functioning vulgarity.

Next, let us consider a number of humorous items and types of humorous items that Paulos presents and apparently takes to be clear-cut examples of incongruity humor. To begin with, he writes:

> Idiot and misunderstanding jokes usually are good illustrations of both superiority and incongruity theories of humor: Two idiots, one tall, skinny, and bald, the other short and fat, come out of a tavern. As they start toward home a bird flies over and defecates on the bald man's head. The short man says he's going back to the tavern for toilet paper, whereupon the tall one observes, "No, don't do that. The bird's probably a mile away by now."
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> A fat man (brother to the one in the previous joke) sits down to dinner with a whole meat loaf on his plate. His wife asks whether she should cut it into four or eight pieces. He replies, "Oh, four, I guess, I'm trying to lose weight."[8]

The first of these two jokes is, in a way, rather complex. At least the following factors enter into its workings. (1) For some people at least,

the very mention of idiots, and the tall idiot's failure to understand what the short idiot has in mind, create a feeling of superiority and relaxation in the way already explained. (2) The contrast of body types between the two idiots accentuates the point that each is far from the mean physically and is physically unattractive, and this in turn reinforces feelings of superiority. (3) For some listeners, to be sure—people who have not recently been embarrassed in similar ways—the embarrassing situation of the tall idiot further reinforces feelings of superiority. (4) To a small but significant extent, the effort to figure out what the tall idiot is thinking when he replies that the bird is probably a mile away already entails an increase in tension, and the absurdity of his thinking, once recognized, serves in a thorough and effective way to undermine this tension. Now of these four factors, the first three have nothing to do with incongruity. As for the fourth, the idiot's final remark shows that he thinks that if the bird were not so far away, it would make sense to use toilet paper on it. Now it can indeed be said to be unfitting to use toilet paper on birds, and for this reason the joke under discussion can be said to involve an incongruity. But the reason it is unfitting to wipe birds with toilet paper is that it would take a considerable and perhaps unpleasant effort to do so and would accomplish nothing—i.e., it would be pointless or absurd. This absurdity is basic, and the incongruity derivative. It would appear safe to say that it is to this blatant absurdity rather than to the derivative and faint incongruity in the case that people react when they hear the joke. As for the meat-loaf joke, one might say that the man's way of reasoning is incongruous with respect to the way reality works, or the facts of nature. But what does this have to do with the psychodynamics of the case? Surely hardly anyone, if anyone at all, hits upon this rather difficult, abstract, philosophical conception in the course of processing the joke mentally and reacting to it. Rather, the audience

makes an effort to understand the man's thinking, and when that thinking proves to be absurd, the tension entailed by that effort, and perhaps a degree of general tension in addition, is released in a chuckle.

In a chapter entitled "Axioms, Levels, and Iteration," Paulos writes:

> The formal structure of [certain] stories or jokes is as follows. Joke-teller: "In what model are axioms 1, 2, and 3 true?" Listener: "In model M." Joke-teller: "No, in model N." The following classic burlesque joke is an example. . . . The dirty old man leers at the innocent young virgin and says, "What goes in hard and dry and comes out soft and wet?" The girl blushes and stammers, "Well, let's see, uh. . . ," to which the dirty old man replies wickedly, "chewing gum." In other words, "model N" in our formal example and "chewing gum" (more accurately the whole scenario suggested by chewing gum) in our burlesque joke play the role of an unexpected and incongruous model of the given "axioms."

Several pages farther on, he adds:

> Riddles also have the same formal structure as the type of joke just discussed. "What has properties A1, A2, and A3?" "M" (or sometimes "I don't know"). "No, N." Homonyms often play a role in riddles as well. Consider the very common riddle: "What's black and white and red all over?" "A newspaper." Frequently, of course, there is more than one incongruous interpretation for a riddle.[9]

Paulos's analysis here in terms of axiom systems and models is sound and most illuminating. But is he correct to maintain that the idea of chewing gum represents an incongruous association to the words "it goes in hard and dry and comes out soft and wet?" Or is this idea merely a different association from the one that comes to mind immediately? In the case of this joke, a sexual association laden with feeling enters the mind of the listener immediate y, an entirely different, nonsexual association, one not laden with much emotional significance, is suggested, and this suggestion

undermines the tension entailed by the first association. There is indeed a transition from one thought or set of thoughts to another, but incongruity plays no part in the case. Compare this case with one in which incongruity does truly play a role: A cute little girl bites into a cookie and suddenly says in an uncharacteristic, loud, rough, very adult voice, "Ah! I really *needed* that!" Here, her way of speaking is not merely different from her usual way, but is incongruous with respect to what she is. In this case, the humor arises at least in part and at least indirectly out of the circumstance that truly incongruous elements are encountered in the same thing (the little girl). As for riddles, it ought to be questioned whether different "interpretations for" (clever answers to) a riddle are incongruous, or just different.

In his chapter "Humor, Grammar, and Philosophy," Paulos writes:

> If we stretch things a bit, a relational reversal, the interchange of two objects or people standing in a certain relation to each other, may . . . count as a kind of generalized nonlinguistic spoonerism. Thus, for example, a greyhound dog with a bus tattooed on its side . . . is a relational reversal. . . .
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> Reversals of this kind are often humorous because they force us to perceive in quick succession the familiar relation and an unfamiliar (and therefore incongruous) one.[10]

The point concerning spoonerisms is surely well taken. As for Paulos's concrete example, a cartoon drawing of a greyhound dog with a bus tattooed on its side is funny partly because the symbol (the bus) is inane. In the real world, there is a serious point to painting the greyhound-emblem on a bus, but, at least in the context of the cartoon, there is no serious point to tattooing the bus-emblem on the dog. The small effort of thought required to recognize the relational reversal brings about a small increase in tension, and the inanity in question serves to undermine

this and general tension. But what role does incongruity play in this case? It appears safe to guess that the bus-tattoo on the dog stimulates momentary puzzlement and an effort of thought directed towards resolving that puzzlement, and this in turn, as already said, entails a small increase in tension that is subsequently released. In the case of this cartoon, then, an incongruity sets in motion a train of events that leads to the humor response. But this gives no more reason for citing the cartoon as an instance of incongruity humor than for citing it as an instance of relational-reversal humor or inanity humor.

In the course of a generally enlightening discussion of the logical structure of nonverbal humor, Paulos writes: "The dignified movements of Charlie Chaplin clash humorously with his appearance as a powerless little man."[11] But is there a clash here, or rather an undermining of respectful attitudes? One who speaks of an undermining of respectful attitudes has this in mind: Chaplin's "dignified movements" establish an initial state of respect, but when the audience notices "his appearance as a powerless little man," the basis for its respect dissolves. But what is meant by a clash? The perception that two things don't go together? But why should this give rise to smiling or laughter? Does the perception of Chaplin's dignified aspect play the same role in eliciting laughter as does the perception of his powerlessness? Apparently not. But if the humor in this case arises from the sort of clashing that Paulos appears to have in mind, then the answer to this question is yes.

It would be helpful at this point to make two distinctions which, it appears safe to say, apply to most or all theories of humor and theoretical analyses of individual items of humor. First, there is a distinction to be made between symmetrical and asymmetrical accounts. Most accounts of the psychodynamics of humor assume the existence of two or more basic dynamic factors (for the sake of simplification, I shall for the most

part conduct my presentation in terms of two factors). For example, in the case of incongruity theories, these two factors are the two things or two aspects of a thing or situation that are incongruous with respect to one another; in the case of Koestler's theory, they are the event, statement, or whatnot that establishes a state of tension, and that which undermines that tension. As the expression shall be used here, symmetrical accounts are those according to which these two factors play the same role in the psychodynamics of humor or of a particular item of humor, and asymmetrical accounts are those according to which they play different roles. Thus, for example, Koestler's theory is asymmetrical in that according to it, factor A and factor B play very different roles in the psychodynamics of any item of humor: factor A establishes a state of tension, and factor B precipitates a sudden release of that tension. Next, there is a quite different distinction to be made among static, two-way transitional, and one-way transitional accounts. As the expression shall be used here, according to static accounts, there is no essential transfer of attention from either of the two factors to the other: they are simply beheld together. According to two-way transitional accounts, the reader's or listener's attention moves back and forth between the two factors A and B, and—this is crucial—moving from A to B has essentially the same effect as moving from B to A. According to one-way transitional accounts, what is essential is a transition of attention from factor A to factor B: this is what brings about the humorous effect. The listener might transfer his attention back from B to A in order to check his comprehension, but this by no means has the same effect as moving from A to B.

Now how do these distinctions apply to Paulos's reasoning? By way of illustration, it would be instructive to apply them to his account of puns. This reads as follows:

> Consider the following two puns: "Colds can be positive or negative. Sometimes the ayes have it, sometimes the nose." Interviewer: "Do you consider clubs appropriate for small children?" W. C. Fields: "Only when kindness fails." In the first, "ayes" and "nose" provide a link between the word cluster having to do with parliamentary rules and that relating to cold symptoms. In the second, which is funnier (probably because it is more aggressive), "clubs" can refer either to Little League, Girl Scouts, and other social organizations or to blunt instruments, beating, and so on.
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> Like the relational reversal, a pun forces one to perceive in quick succession two incongruous and unrelated sets of ideas. . . .
>
> A convenient way to conceive of puns is in terms of the intersection of two sets. A pun is a word or phrase that belongs to two or more distinct universes of discourse and thus brings *both* to mind. The humor, if there is any, results from the inappropriate and incongruous sets of associated ideas jarring each other. Thus the W. C. Fields pun related above can be pictured as in figure 19 [i.e., by means of a Venn diagram consisting of two overlapping circles: the circle on the left is labelled *Little League, Social organizations, Girl Scouts,* the one on the right, *Blunt instruments, Beating, Misanthropy,* and the area of overlap, *Clubs*], where the word *clubs* can be seen as forcing one to juxtapose the two unrelated sets of ideas. The energy flow, so to speak, is from left to right in the diagram, as [sic] *clubs* serves as a slide down which the laughter falls.[12]

First, a few miscellaneous remarks. Clearly, a pun does not *merely* present two things in succession: it presents two things in succession by bringing about an interpretation switch. Moreover, a pun does not necessarily indicate any respect in which two things are related; in this sense, it does not necessarily link two things. In the cases of the two puns quoted by Paulos, the only links that are established lie on the level of words, not that of things. The spoken sentence "Sometimes the (ayes/eyes) have it" can be used to say something about parliamentary

debates or something entirely different and unconnected about colds, but this pun does not suggest any connection at all between parliamentary debates and colds; similarly for the Fields pun. Nevertheless, to be sure, a pun might be used to draw attention to an unobvious connection among things or events.

Now let us consider the W. C. Fields pun in detail. The arousal-reduction account of its psychodynamics is, to begin with, asymmetrical. According to this account, factor A, the question whether social clubs are a good thing for young children, establishes a sort of cognitive arousal, and factor B, the idea of using heavy sticks to beat rambunctious young children once kindness has failed, or, perhaps, a mental image of W. C. Fields miming the action of doing so, serves to precipitate the release of that arousal in a chuckle. Thus, according to the arousal-reduction account, factor A and factor B play different roles in the psychodynamics of the case. This account is, moreover, a one-way transitional account: it is a transition of attention from the question whether social clubs are a good thing for young children (factor A) to a mental image of W. C. Fields pretending to beat noisy young children with a heavy stick, or whatever (factor B) that creates the humorous effect. Moving back to reconsider factor A might aid one's comprehension, but this in itself, according to the present account, does not trigger any humorous response at all. Now let us ask what characteristics a pure, uncompromising incongruity account of the Fields pun would have—i.e., would it be symmetrical or asymmetrical, static, one-way transitional, or two-way transitional? To begin with, it would be, at least fundamentally, symmetrical. For according to a pure incongruity account, factor A contributes to the humorous effect in that it is a term of an incongruity, factor B does likewise, and thus, fundamentally, they play the same role in bringing about the humorous effect. A pure incongruity account would also be at least

fundamentally static. Basically, an incongruity is something taken in all at once; hence, if the humorous effect stems simply from the contemplation of an incongruity, then any mental transition between factor A and factor B, the terms of the incongruity, is inessential. It might be necessary to look or think back and forth a few times between A and B to get the incongruity firmly in mind, but according to the theory in question, it is not this back-and-forth transition, but rather the recognition of the incongruity, that is essential. It is perhaps especially clear that a pure incongruity account would not be one-way transitional.

Now let us ask how Paulos's account of the Fields pun is to be characterized. It appears fair to say that it is at once a symmetrical and an asymmetrical account. His talk of "incongruous" sets of ideas "jarring each other" strongly suggests a symmetrical account, i.e., one according to which the two factors in question play the same role in generating the humor. On the other hand, his talk of an "energy flow" suggests that within the context of this pun, thoughts of social clubs represent a "high energy area" and thoughts of beating people with sticks a "low energy area" to which energy flows as water flows down a hill, and this picture, whatever its precise import, strongly suggests an asymmetrical account according to which the two factors in question play quite different roles in the psychodynamics of the case. Paulos, then, appears to waver between a symmetrical and an asymmetrical account. Likewise, he appears to waver between a two-way transitional account (his talk of the two relevant factors "jarring each other"), and a one-way transitional account (his talk of an "energy flow," which suggests that what is essential is a one-way transfer of attention from factor A to factor B). In that symmetrical and asymmetrical accounts are mutually contradictory and two-way transitional and one-way transitional accounts are likewise mutually contradictory, Paulos's account is incoherent in these two fundamental respects.

One suspects that he has mixed a pure incongruity account of the Fields pun with a nonincongruity arousal-reduction account.

Paulos's account of the Fields pun, then, appears to have two inconsistent sides or aspects. It can be argued that as he has stated them, both these sides contain errors. To begin with, under the right conditions, the juxtaposition of the idea of forming social clubs for young children with that of using heavy sticks to beat young children might indeed be felt to be incongruous. The right conditions are conditions that encourage comparison and contrast and an effort to combine these two ideas into a harmonious whole of some sort. Now it is clear that one who follows and appreciates the Fields pun does indeed make a mental transition: he or she first thinks of social clubs for young children, and then imagines W. C. Fields or someone else pretending to beat or beating young children with a stick. But to make a mental transition from one image or thought to another, however jarring that transition might be, and to compare, contrast, and try to combine those two images or thoughts, are two very different things. But if one does not compare, contrast, and try to combine them, one does not appreciate any incongruity that may lie in their juxtaposition. In the case of the Fields pun, introspection leads me to think that if there is any comparing or contrasting of the two images or thoughts in question, or any attempt to combine them into a harmonious whole, this is inessential to the humorous effect. But if this is so, then it is inessential to notice any incongruity that might be felt to lie in their juxtaposition. A further question arises. Even if one does recognize, and, as it were, feel an incongruity here, why should this incongruity be funnier than, say, the sight of two unrelated photographs sitting side by side on a mantlepiece, or the sight of an expensive pen and a cheap one pinned side by side in a shirt pocket? There just isn't anything very comical in the mere juxtaposition of an image of a man using a stick

to beat children with the question of social clubs for children, however suddenly and cleverly this juxtaposition is effected.

Secondly, to turn once more to the Venn diagram of the Fields pun, it is perhaps misleading to say, as Paulos does, that the energy flow is from left to right, for this suggests that considerable energy flows, as it were, into the idea of beating children with sticks—i.e., these words can be taken to imply that the audience makes a transition from thinking seriously of social clubs for young children to thinking more or less seriously of beating children. But surely an account along lines described by Koestler would be more accurate: the energy flow is from left to empty space, as it were. That is, the listener starts out thinking in a more or less effortful way in terms of children and social clubs and the like, and then the tension or arousal entailed by this effort is dissipated in smiling or laughter.

It is time now to consider what general criticisms might be made of the incongruity theory of humor. To begin with, recall that Paulos proposes to use the term "incongruity" in an extended sense in which all the "oppositions" he lists, "expectation versus surprise, the mechanical versus the spiritual, superiority versus incompetence, balance versus exaggeration, and propriety versus vulgarity" count as incongruities. As has been argued, however, the poles of these oppositions do not all represent incongruities in the usual sense of the term. Thus, there is no incongruity in having both a certain height and weight and certain thoughts and feelings, nor in seeing a person first as competent and then as incompetent or vice versa, nor does caricature necessarily involve incongruity. This gives reason to suspect that Paulos's proposal extends the meaning of the term "incongruity" dangerously far. Perhaps it would be a step in the right direction to speak, not simply of incongruities, but of oppositions, contrasts, differences, incongruities, and the like that

give rise to humor. A tendency to lump different things together appears to be characteristic of incongruity theories of humor. Thus, for example, Paul E. McGhee, a well-known student of children's humor who subscribes to a general incongruity theory, includes "absurd, unexpected, inappropriate, and otherwise out-of-context events" under the term "incongruous relationship."[13] But in ordinary usage, the terms "incongruous," "absurd," "unexpected," "inappropriate," and "out-of-context" all mean very different things. One suspects that the practice of lumping such very different things together conceals more than it reveals.

This suggests a route by which a theorist might arrive at the conclusion that all humor is based on incongruity: In some cases, humor does clearly turn on incongruity, and this establishes the idea that there is some significant connection between humor on the one hand and incongruity on the other. But the concept of incongruity is highly vague, and so it is easy to fall to extending it to the point where almost any difference counts as an incongruity. (Perhaps, too, there are special cases that encourage this extension of the concept: special cases in which any significant difference does amount to an incongruity—e.g., sufficiently great variation from a standard that defines membership in a class of things.) But all humor does in fact involve transitions, and hence differences among various elements and factors. Hence, the conclusion readily suggests itself that all humor involves incongruity. But this in turn suggests that incongruity is the basis of all humor, for, so the reasoning goes, it cannot be a mere *coincidence* that all humor involves incongruity. The only conclusion actually warranted by the reasoning to this point is, of course, the vacuous one that all humor involves differences among various elements and factors. But it is very easy to fall into a fatal equivocation, namely, that between (1) All humor involves incongruity (in a broad sense in which almost any difference counts as an incongruity), and (2) All

humor involves incongruity (in a limited, narrow sense). To move from (1) to (2) is to move from a vacuous truth to an outright falsehood, a falsehood that constitutes a major error in the theory of humor. Perhaps, then, to summarize, the general incongruity theory of humor arises from a fatal equivocation which in turn stems from an overextension of the concept of incongruity.

Within the context of the theory of humor, the only useful concept of incongruity is a narrow one. If the position that all humor involves or is based on incongruity is to be meaningful, i.e., not vacuous, the concept of incongruity must be given a relatively limited, well-defined meaning.

Incongruity theories which, like that of Paulos, posit a transfer of attention from one factor to another and a consequent release of tension are vulnerable to the following line of questioning. If factor A and factor B jointly play a single psychodynamic role in generating the humor response, then why is it necessary for the audience to transfer attention from the one to the other? If incongruity is humorous in itself, then transition is not essential to humor, because an incongruity can be recognized all at once. On the other hand, if a transfer of attention and a consequent release of tension are essential to humor, the question arises why either point in the transition need constitute an incongruity, either with respect to the other point, or with respect to something else, or in itself. To be sure, if the second point in the transition, B, constitutes an incongruity in itself, this might suffice to precipitate a release of tension. Likewise if B is incongruous with respect to A. But these observations suggest that incongruity is not essential to humor, for there are many things besides incongruity that can precipitate the requisite release of tension.

A great weakness of the incongruity theory of humor is that it contains no satisfactory account of the psychodynamics of humor. To say simply that incongruities are sometimes perceived as comical is to

explain nothing. The incongruity theory is a symmetrical, static theory, in the senses defined above. It is clear, however, that in very many cases, asymmetrical, one-way transitional accounts decribe the psychodynamics involved.

What role, then, does incongruity play in the generation of humorous effects? In attacking this question, let us continue to assume the truth of an arousal-reduction theory of humor of the sort to which Paulos appears to subscribe. Such a theory must recognize the following factors in the process whereby the humor response is generated. First, predisposing factors, that is, factors which predispose a person to take a given event or situation humorously rather than otherwise. Secondly, initiating factors, that is, factors which establish the initial state, that is, the state of arousal, tension, or effort that is reduced by the humor response. Thirdly, precipitating factors, factors that undermine the initial state and thereby bring on laughter, smiling, or the like. Now assuming that this framework is sound, it would appear that an incongruity, which is to say a whole that in one way or another entails an incongruity, can contribute to the generation of a humorous effect in only a few ways: (1) as a predisposing factor; (2) as an initiating factor that gives rise to a state of puzzlement or effortful thought—perhaps in some riddles the initiating factor is an incongruity or apparent incongruity; (3) as a precipitating factor that undermines seriousness or effort through absurdity. In case (2), that in which an incongruity functions as initiating factor, the precipitating factor can be either sudden success in resolving the puzzle, or a sudden abandonment of the effort to resolve it, due either to the perception that it has no solution or to the decision that the effort required is too great. If, however, one side of an incongruity functions as initiating factor in its own right and the other side functions as precipitating factor in its own right, then the incongruity itself does not figure essentially in the

psychodynamics of the case. For, given favorable predisposing conditions, all that is necessary are effective initiating and precipitating factors, and so it is not essential that the audience recognize any incongruity that their juxtaposition might entail.

In conclusion, given the plausibility of the basic arousal-reduction theory of humor, it is highly implausible to claim that all humor is based on incongruity or that incongruity is essential to humor. An incongruity can function as predisposing factor, initiating factor, or precipitating factor, but entirely nonincongruous states and events can do so also.

NOTES

1. Paulos, John Allen. *Mathematics and Humor*, University of Chicago Press, 1980.
2. *Mathematics andHumor*, p. 9.
3. *Mathematics and Humor*, p. 10.
4. Cited by Arthur Koestler in his article "Humour and Wit" in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
5. Allen, Woody. *Getting Even*, Vintage Books, 1978, p. 25. Quoted in *Mathematics and Humor*, p. 72.
6. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, G. and C. Merriam Co., 1971.
7. See P. F. Strawson, *Individuals : An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, Chapter 3, University Paperbacks, 1979.
8. *Mathematics and Humor*, p. 16.
9. *Mathematics and Humor*, pp. 24, 26.
10. *Mathematics and Humor*, p. 58.
11. *Mathematics and Humor*, p. 66.
12. *Mathematics and Humor*, pp. 60–61.
13. McGhee, Paul E. *Humor : Its Origin and Development*, W. H. Freeman and Co., 1979, p. 42.